



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Doctrinal Catechesis Session
Mary Birmingham

LENT: AN OVERVIEW



Ary Sheffer, The Temptation of Christ, 1854, public domain.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Create an environment in which the liturgical color purple is used, and the images of baptism and penitence are expressed (such as water and ashes).

Opening Prayer

so what could be left, sister lent?

I thought I had uncovered it all...layer by layer I shed it all away...

so what could be left, sister lent?

like a snake squirming from the casing of his former self
and the butterfly wrestling from the safe bondage of her quiet hibernation...

I stand empty...

a wonderful, curious new creation,
chosen of God...

nakedly I gaze before discernment's interior mirror...

so what could be left, sister lent?

Sunday after Sunday, story after story, decision after decision,
gave way to an empty, vulnerable vessel, ready for Easter filling...

so what could be left, sister lent?

like an air-dried sponge I stand waiting...

for what do I wait?

for fire light's illumination...

for baptismal water's soaking immersion...

for confirmation oil's sealing configuration...

for Eucharist bread and wine's sumptuous celebration

for dying, rising, famine, for feasting,

for those who are out to be one with the *in...*

to eat, to be broken, to be poured, to be filled,

to live by example, to die,

to be food for the hungry, the lost, the blind, and the obstinate...

I wait to give more of the gift already given,

the sacrament of life for the sake of the kingdom...

so, forty more days of repentance and ashes

to renew, to strengthen and prepare for the banquet...

is there more? could there be?

one forgotten remnant

of a life not yet surrendered, of blindness, repression?

be it sojourn, or Passover, or exodus event

I stand with eyes opened, my heart is in my hand...

what could be left? only **YOU** know for sure...

so do what **YOU** will, root out from the core

all that might keep me from the life you intend

of thanksgiving, of service and praise to the end.

Mary Birmingham, "Preparation for the Celebration of the Scrutinies," *Christian Initiation*, (February/March 1997),
Kansas City: National Catholic Reporter, 1.

✓ Note to the Catechist

There may be more material than you can use in a one-hour session. Select and arrange accordingly. Use questions and material that are best suited for your particular group.



Read the connecting statement

to draw the line between this week's liturgy and this chosen doctrinal theme.

This connecting statement is found in the Breaking Open the Word worksheet for this week.

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Version 2.0 reflects all recent revisions in the Roman Missal.

NIHIL OBSTAT
Rev. Steven Olds
Censor Liborum

IMPRIMATUR
† Most Rev. John Noonan
Bishop of Orlando

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Editors: Bill Huebsch, Diana Macalintal, & Nick Wagner

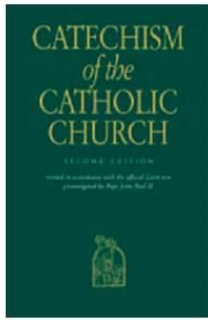
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Sharing Human Experience

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in a small group setting of three or four people. Remind participants to make time for everyone in the group to respond to the questions.

- ▶ What if someone asked you to explain the meaning of Lent and why you observe it in the first place, how would you answer him or her?
- ▶ What does it mean to you?
- ▶ If you have no previous understanding of the term, what does it mean to you from what you have heard others say about it?



Sharing Catholic Doctrine

Drawn from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

Refer to articles 540, 1095, and 1538.

Catechist continues:

- ▶ The first two Sundays of Lent relate the story of the temptation of Jesus and his transfiguration. The Church has celebrated these two events on the first two Sundays of Lent since the fourth century.
- ▶ The desert figures into the season of Lent, even though a far more apt image of the season is the water of baptism.
- ▶ The desert is a place of temptation and a place where the people of Israel were both faithful and unfaithful. The desert is a symbol of contemplation of God. Free of encumbrances and distractions, the desert is a place of encounter with God.
- ▶ The first reading of the First Sunday of Lent in all three cycles proclaims God's interaction in human history from the creation of the world. They remind us that God has been active in our lives from the very beginning and that the coming of the Christ was intended from that beginning.
- ▶ All three cycles on the First Sunday of Lent proclaim the temptation of Jesus in the desert.
- ▶ The good news of this proclamation is that Jesus was victorious in his struggle with Satan. The gospel is a reminder to us today that we are all to stay in the struggle against evil with the understanding that because of our faith in Christ the power of hell will not prevail against us.
- ▶ The liturgies of Lent prepare the elect for baptism at the Easter Vigil and prepare the faithful to renew our baptismal promises during the Easter season.
- ▶ The liturgies and readings of the season help us reflect on the power of sin in our lives but also on the undeniable reality of grace that overcomes sin.
- ▶ Lent is an extended meditation on our need to turn our lives completely over to God, to express sincere sorrow for the sin in our lives, and to renew our participation in the paschal mystery of Christ.
 - Jesus' encounter with the power of evil on the Temple parapet in Jerusalem foreshadows his future death on the cross, a reminder of the mandate of Christian discipleship, to carry one's cross for the sake of the gospel (CCC, #540).
- ▶ The liturgies of Lent immediately echo that change is afoot. Worshippers instinctively experience the subtle changes. Ritual, music, and environment reflect the changes.

If this session takes place on the First Sunday of Lent or after, engage in the following exercise. Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question in the wider group.

- ▶ What is different about the liturgy you experienced so far in this season of Lent?
- ▶ What specifically have you noticed?
- ▶ What is distinctive about the Sunday liturgy?

Catechist continues:

- ▶ The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* affirms two prominent themes during the season of Lent, baptismal and penitential. However, the penitential theme usually takes prominence since it is only in the last thirty years that the Church restored the ancient catechumenate, thus restoring the prominence of the elect in the Lenten liturgies.
- ▶ Catholics have a well-developed sense of the penitential nature of the season. What is less developed is a sense of the baptismal nature of Lent. The Church does, however, insist on the importance of both themes:
- ▶ “By recalling or preparing for baptism and by repentance, this season disposes the faithful as they more diligently listen to the word of God and devote themselves to prayer to celebrate the paschal mystery. The baptismal and penitential aspects of Lent are to be given greater prominence in both the liturgy and liturgical catechesis” (CSL, #109).

Baptismal

- ▶ The primary theme of the season is baptismal. The season of Lent is the final spiritual preparation for those who will be baptized at the Easter Vigil.
- ▶ The faithful support the elect in their preparation by their prayer, fasting, and support.
- ▶ The faithful similarly prepare to recommit to their baptism by renewing their baptismal promises at the Easter season Vigil.
- ▶ All things are made new at Easter, including a recommitment of our life in Christ.
- ▶ “Lent is a preparation for the celebration of Easter. For the Lenten liturgy disposes both the catechumens and the faithful to celebrate the paschal mystery; catechumens, through the several stages of Christian initiation; the faithful, through reminders of their own baptism and through penitential practices” (*General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*, #27).

Penitential

- ▶ In addition to baptismal preparation, Lent is also a time to seriously examine our lives and root out all that is sinful.
- ▶ We ask God to heal the areas of deep-seated, habitual sin, weakness, and woundedness.
- ▶ We make a heartfelt commitment to change our lives.
- ▶ We ask God to heal us.
- ▶ We ask for the grace to heal, to grow, and to be converted more profoundly to Jesus Christ.
- ▶ The Church takes an entire season to reflect on both of those realities.

OPTIONAL EXERCISE

Choose several of your parish's lenten musical selections. Give copies of the selections to participants, and invite them to underline texts that reflect the baptismal theme of Lent and mark them with a "B" and texts that reflect the penitential theme and mark them with a "P." Extend this exercise if time permits by choosing several ritual prayers of the season, such as a Preface for Lent or Opening Prayers of the lenten Sunday liturgies and inviting participants to underline baptismal themes and mark them with a "B" and penitential themes and mark them with a "P." Participants explain the reasons for their choices.

Catechist continues:

- ▶ Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and extends for six weeks.
- ▶ We gather for Mass or for a celebration of God's word.
- ▶ We ritualize our commitment to enter into this time of baptismal and penitential conversion with a sign of the cross placed on our forehead with ashes.
- ▶ The conferral of ashes is a sign of our commitment of renewal. We commit to turn away from sin, to enter more deeply into Christ's death and resurrection, and to be reborn through the waters of baptism at Easter.
- ▶ The Church designates three disciplines that help us more fully participate in the season of Lent and prepare for the Easter sacraments. We practice the lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.
- ▶ Prayer turns our minds and hearts to God, fasting purifies our minds, hearts, and intentions, and the money that would be spent on food and other items, are spent instead on alms for poor people.
- ▶ Lent officially ends at the beginning of the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday.
- ▶ Lent is not an extended meditation on the cross of Christ. Holy Week is the time par excellence for that meditation. Lent prepares our hearts to more fully enter into the mystery of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection.
- ▶ Holy Week begins on Palm Sunday.
- ▶ In addition to the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, the Catholic faithful also engage in other devotions and spiritual practices. Many parishes celebrate the Stations of the Cross in which the faithful remember the various stages of Jesus passion and journey to Calvary.
- ▶ Some parishes host parish retreats.
- ▶ Most parishes heighten their efforts of care for the poor and oppressed in the world.
- ▶ Most parishes offer multiple opportunities for the people to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation—both in communal and private forms.

Christian Initiation

- ▶ Lent coincides with the third period of the catechumenate called the period of purification and enlightenment.
- ▶ The Church sets aside an entire season for spiritual preparation for the elect.
- ▶ Formal catechesis ends, and those preparing for baptism enter an intense time of spiritual preparation for the Easter sacraments.
- ▶ The elect are a primary focus of Lent. The faithful prayerfully support them in the final leg of their journey to the table.
 - The First Sunday of Lent: the elect celebrate the rite of election. Normatively it is presided over by the bishop at the diocesan cathedral. This ritual celebrates God's election, God's choice of the elect. Election is God's choice, not ours. The elect sign their names in the Book of the Elect, thus enrolling their names for baptism. The parish, the primary nurturer of the elect, shows its prayerful support by sometimes celebrating an optional rite of sending to election at one of the early morning Masses on the First Sunday of Lent.
 - Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent: the elect celebrate penitential rites called scrutinies. Scrutinies for the elect are similar but not exactly like the sacrament of reconciliation is for the faithful. They are penitential rites intended to heal what is defective and sinful in the elect and to bring out and strengthen all that is good in them, in preparation for their baptism at the Easter Vigil.
 - Third and Fifth Week of Lent: The elect may be presented with the Creed and the Lord's Prayer on the third and fifth weeks of Lent in preparation for making their first profession of faith at baptism and in preparation for being initiated into the Church through the sacrament of baptism.

For a more thorough treatment of the season of Lent, refer to *Word and Worship Workbook* for Years A, B, and C, Paulist Press.

EXERCISE

Re-read the poem from the opening prayer, or give copies to each participant. Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups. Catechist answers the last question first and then invites participants to respond to all of the questions. See appendix #1 for an example. Catechist affords ample time in the small groups for reflection on the poem. Surface their insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What speaks to you the most in this poem?
- ▶ What captures your imagination?
- ▶ What is this catechumen expressing?
- ▶ What are the major themes in this poem?
- ▶ What is left in your journey? What needs to be shed away?

Commentary of the poem

- ▶ These words are the quiet ruminations of a catechumen, standing on the threshold of the rite of election, and they serve as a prism of discernment, not just for those preparing for baptism, but for all the faithful who begin their forty-day trek through the wilderness of water and ashes.
- ▶ This catechumen unfolds for the reader a powerful theology of Lent.
- ▶ If the elect are to freely plunge into the Vigil's baptismal waters to embrace the paschal mystery in their lives, then Lent necessarily becomes a time of discernment, a time to discover where purification is still needed so the light of Christ may permeate those areas.
- ▶ This final step is not simply the business of the elect; it is the responsibility of all who prepare to renew their baptismal promises at Easter.
- ▶ The faithful similarly discern how they have lived out (or not) their role as priest, prophet, and king throughout the past year.
- ▶ The faithful support the elect in their final preparation as they prepare for the renewal of their own covenant to serve God's people, proclaim God's word, and lead people to Christ.



Community Connections

Catechist invites participants to relate what was shared today to an experience in their lives. Catechist shares an experience from his or her life and invites others to do the same.

Catechist informs the group of any parish activity taking place and makes arrangements for group participation.

During Lent we are called to observe the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. One way we observe these disciplines is by participating in the ongoing work of charity and justice that goes on around us.

What is taking place in the parish and local community this week that challenges you to take action?

For example, "This week our parish is beginning its sixth 'Homes for Habitat.' A call has gone out for workers to help build this next house. We will meet next Saturday to assist in this work. Afterward we will gather for prayer and reflection."



Mystagogy & your decision for change

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following challenge by sharing with one other person.

- ▶ Name one thing you would like to change in your life this lenten season (perhaps an attitude or behavior).
- ▶ Name one thing you are not presently doing that you would like to do to become a better disciple.
- ▶ In what way do you plan to observe the three disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving? Be specific.
- ▶ Name one change that you have already made in your life that you would like to affirm or celebrate.
- ▶ Perhaps Lent is a time to commit to participate in the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Which one might you commit to?



Closing Prayer

Option 1: If this is a catechumenal session, end the session with Intercessions and Doxology (“Glory be to the Father...”) or a minor rite—a blessing or minor exorcism, RCIA #90-97.

Option 2: Opening Prayers B: #21, 22, Masses and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions, Sacramentary, “For the Progress of Peoples” and “For Peace and Justice,” Intercessions, Lord’s Prayer, or Prayer of Saint Francis.

APPENDIX

#1.

As I approach Lent I am called to trust God more faithfully and completely. Many of the stories I have shared in this resource so far have celebrated the yearlong recovery of my mentally ill son. That recovery has come to a screeching halt. The past ten years of hell are fast-forwarding before my eyes, and I am gripped by fear. This child who has enjoyed a year of relative freedom from insanity has stopped taking medication. While it is a very common complication of this disease, we hoped against hope that it would not happen, that on some level he would embrace the grace of the past year and stay on his medication. Sadly, it was not meant to be. We will be facing difficult decisions very soon.

The boulder in the path of my relationship with God this Lent is fear—fear that I will be unable to deal with a repeat performance of the last ten years. I was willing to put my child completely in God's hands and let God take care of him before. Will I be able to do it again?

Lent challenges me to trust, to abandon my life and the life of my child to God's providential care. That is a very tall order when the hopelessness and powerlessness of mental illness comes crashing down around us. Not only are we forced to watch him suffer untold pain, but we are unable to lift a finger to help him. He is an adult and an adult has the right and freedom to be insane. The logic of that law defies description!

Yet in spite of the powerlessness I face, I am called to trust. We are told that perfect love casts out all fear. I pray for the necessary love and strength to shed away the demon skin of fear. Fear's slithering grasp of my peace is a constant obstacle to a life of faithful discipleship to which I am called. Thus, as I stand ready for Easter filling, I pray that I am able, with the grace of God, to make space for that Easter filling. May the emptiness I feel be offered for those poor souls who similarly suffer from mental illness and their families who love them and are unable to help them.